

● Rudd disgusted ● Police seize child photos ● Censorship outrage

Art obscenity charges

Josephine Tovey, Les Kennedy and Jonathan Dart

THE art world has denounced a "dark day in Australian culture" after police seized up to 21 photographs of naked child models and said they would lay charges over an exhibition by the renowned artist Bill Henson.

While the Prime Minister described the works as "revolting" and devoid of artistic merit, the art community and former models for the artist defended Henson, rejecting the accusation that his works are pornographic.

At 3pm yesterday police announced charges would be laid under both the NSW and Commonwealth Crimes acts for publishing an indecent article. The NSW action could involve the hung photos and promotional material, and the Commonwealth action involves catalogue images on the internet.

It was unclear whether Henson or people from the Roslyn Oxley9 gallery in Paddington, which published several of the controversial images on its website and on promotional material, would be charged. Both Henson and the gallery owner, Roslyn Oxley, went to ground yesterday. Henson is understood to be distressed.

In dramatic scenes police took his pictures in packing cases to a truck outside the gallery. The Rose Bay police commander, Superintendent Allan Sicard, told media there: "This morning police have attended the gallery and executed a search warrant and seized several items depicting a child under the age of 16 years of age in a sexual context."

The photos involve a girl and boy, believed to be 13 and 12.

The Herald understands that previous Henson works are also being examined by police. Henson has been producing similar works for years without police intervention, and they have been

WHAT THEY SAID



KEVIN RUDD Prime Minister

'I find them absolutely revolting ... let's just allow kids to be kids.'



DAVID MARR Page 7

'We haven't seen a spectacle like this since Portnoy's Complaint ... in 1969.'

EDITORIAL

As individuals we may ... reject his work, declare it unsuccessful, or find it tasteless or repugnant. But as a society we should pause before reacting to it with police raids and criminal charges.

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exhibited and lauded worldwide, as long ago as the 1995 Venice Biennale. But police raided the gallery on Thursday night following a complaint from Hetty Johnston, of the child sexual assault advocacy group Bravehearts.

"I did make a complaint yesterday, absolutely," Ms Johnston said. "I asked them to prosecute, both the gallery and the photographer, but I'd like to see the parents as well looked into. What parent in



No show ... police supervise the removal of Bill Henson's photographs from the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Paddington. Photo: Sahlan Hayes

their right mind would allow their 12- or 13-year-old to strip off naked and display themselves all over the internet? That's not in the interests of the child. What's happening here is that the arts community have felt that they've been able to get away with this under the guise of art for a number of years, and I think this is the community drawing a line in the sand and saying, 'Enough's enough'."

Earlier yesterday the gallery released a statement: "After much consideration we have decided to withdraw a number of works from the current Bill Henson exhibition that have attracted controversy. The current show, without the said works, will be reopened for viewing in coming days."

The Herald revealed details of the exhibition on Thursday, following an early viewing. The photographs of naked children comprised about a third of the

exhibition. Most were taken from the waist up, though the genitals of the girl are visible in one image. Politicians, including Kevin Rudd, condemned the exhibition, and talkback radio lines ran hot.

"I find them absolutely revolting," Mr Rudd told the Nine Network. "Whatever the artistic view of the merits of that sort of stuff - frankly, I don't think there are any - just allow kids to be kids."

But the prominent gallery owner Anna Schwartz said: "It's a dark day for Australian culture in my view. It is an indictment of a culture when an artist of the integrity and stature of Bill Henson isn't free to show his work."

Although Henson could not be reached yesterday, he told the Herald this week he chose to work with children at the beginning of puberty because they were "half in childhood, half in the adult world" and this "creates a floating world



Controversial ... a detail of one of the photographs in the exhibition.



Henson ... distressed.

Triumph of the philistines



BILL HENSON must bitterly regret his decision to use a photograph of a pubescent, bare-breasted girl on the invitation card for his exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Little more than three years after breaking all records for a photography exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW and the National Gallery of Victoria and 13 years after being the official Australian representative at the Venice Biennale, he stands on the brink of prosecution for the work that has brought him worldwide fame.

To the rest of the world Henson is not simply one of Australia's best-known artists - he is the undisputed Numero Uno. No other contemporary Australian artist in any medium enjoys such an exalted reputation or has a more devoted market. And Henson is - first and foremost - an artist rather than a photographer. His pictures are dark and edgy, but it would be foolish to write them off as "pornography".

Pornography, as I understand it, is a form that revels in its own sordidness. It is a commercial product made for the sole purpose of titillation. Yet even Henson's

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